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BEGINNING IN 1964, THE RHETORIC DIVISION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS BEGAN AN EXTENSIVE STUDY OF ITS RHETORIC PROGRAM. IN SUMMER 1965, THE INSTRUCTIONAL STAFF MET WITH HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS AND CONSULTANTS TO REVIEW THE UNIVERSITY'S PROGRAM AND TO PLAN A REVISION OF THE BOOKLET, "STANDARDS IN FRESHMAN RHETORIC AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS." THIS ARTICLE DISCUSSES THE STUDIES MADE, AND INCLUDES GENERAL COMMENTS ON THE PREPARATION AND QUALIFICATIONS OF RHETORIC TEACHERS AND THE EFFECT ON THE RHETORIC PROGRAM OF THE CHANGING CALIBER OF ENTERING FRESHMEN. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED AS PART OF "THE ADE BULLETIN," NUMBER 8, MAY 1966. (BN)

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THE RHETORIC PROGRAM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

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In September, 1964, research was begun on the status of the rhetoric program at the University of Illinois and on some of the best current practices in the teaching of rhetoric in other universities. This report, 113 pages in length, was prepared by Wilmer A. Lamar and Ruth E. McGugan who were working with the Rhetoric Research Committee appointed by Frank B. Moake, Chairman of the Rhetoric Division. Valuable assistance was given by the Testing and Research Division of the Office of Instructional Resources, and the Dean of Admissions and Records. Continued research during the summer of 1965 was made possible by funds allocated by Dr. Lyle H. Lanier, Executive Vice-President and Provost of the University of Illinois. Fifteen high school teachers gave of their time for a two day conference at which the Standards in Freshman Rhetoric at the University of Illinois was reviewed. The entire instructional staff of the Rhetoric Division cooperated fully.

It was realized at the outset that the problems presented in rhetoric would make absolute conclusions impossible. (If this were not so, someone would have developed a thoroughly satisfactory rhetoric course long ago.) It was hoped, however, that the facts presented in this report would serve as a basis for the thought of those who are charged with the responsibility of modifying course offerings and methods of procedure. Among other things, this research study covered the changing caliber of students admitted directly from high schools to the University of Illinois in the last ten years; the exemption policy -- past and present -- at the University; the qualifications (e.g., education and teaching experience) of the instructional staff and the reactions of this staff to the present program; a description of the in-service training program at the University; the reactions of current and past Rhetoric 101 and 102 students to those courses; the appraisal of high school teachers of University of Illinois rhetoric standards; the theory and practice of teaching freshman composition courses in a selected number of other schools; and points that warrant further consideration.

One factor which makes a study of the Freshman Rhetoric Program at the University of Illinois important at this time is the changing caliber of students admitted directly from high schools. In 1955, for example, only 47.5% of the entering freshmen (3163) were in the upper quartile of their graduating classes; in 1965, 85% of the 5511 students admitted were in the upper quartile. At the lower end of the scale, in 1955, 7.5% were in the lowest quartile, but in 1965, only 0.18% were in the lowest quartile. These figures are significant if one is planning a program which will best meet the needs of the current student body.

The research did not include a comprehensive study of exemption practices in other schools in the country. However, it was discovered that many schools, in describing their exemption practices, did not define such terms as "exceptional" or "do well on the APT," and few schools gave any indication of the numbers or percentages of students actually exempted according to their rules. The report does show a wide variation in exemption policy and constant experiment and change. The Director of Freshman English at one large state university (where about 22% of Freshman students are exempted) mentioned that the policy at his school is sound academically, but cautions that "many schools are now exempting as a simple matter of economic expediency." Incoming students at the University of Illinois are now being given the CEEB Test In English Composition. Those who score sufficiently high (about 18%) will be given credit for the first semester of Rhetoric. These students will go at once into a similar course designed for them.

A study of the academic qualifications of the 150 graduate assistants teaching in the Rhetoric Division at the University of Illinois showed that most of even the first-year assistants had at least a year of graduate study behind them and were just shy of the M.A. degree. Eighty-seven percent of the sections were taught by people with the M.A. degree and varying amounts of additional academic work. Between 70% and 80% of the graduate assistants are usually reappointed from the previous year. Ordinarily, the English Department receives about 500 applications for financial aid each year. Of this 500, about one-half have a grade-point average of 4.5 or above and it is from this group that new assistants are appointed.

Since almost no one who teaches composition has been taught how to teach it, and almost everyone has to learn this art on the job, the teaching advisor system at the University of Illinois provides the graduate assistant with a good opportunity to learn the art of teaching composition under the supervision of experienced teachers. The functions of teaching advisors are two-fold -- advisory and evaluative. This kind of supervision includes class visitation; consultation on theme grading and comments written by the teacher on the themes; and group meetings (attended by both Junior and Senior Staff members) which encourage new staff members to devote some conscientious thought to their teaching and to give them the benefit of as much experience as possible in planning their instruction and in solving the problems they encounter. A further aid to instructors is the Teaching Aids File. Staff members are invited to make contributions to it and these are made available to the entire staff. The teaching aids in the file include such

things as theme assignments, vocabulary lists and tests, quizzes on mechanics, study questions on essays, lists of theme topics, and explanations (with examples) of the form of documentation to be used in research papers. The philosophy behind the Teaching Aids File is that it should be a source of inspiration for the staff: it should stimulate the teacher who consults it to develop related ideas for presentation of material to his classes, rather than provide a source of cheap class preparations.

As a part of the University's recently intensified program of improving instruction on the freshman and sophomore levels, the Provost's office provided funds for a one-week orientation session for newly appointed graduate assistants in English. From September 8 to 14, 1965, the 33 new assistants met with the Rhetoric Steering Committee in morning and afternoon sessions. The staff focused on three activities with which composition teachers are likely to have the most difficulty -- grading themes constructively, making good theme assignments, and conducting meaningful class discussions.

The research project included a study of current staff members as students in rhetoric. There were reports of a few unusual circumstances in courses that they had taken, but the majority of the staff described courses quite similar in structure and operation to those now offered at Illinois. The standard seemed to be a two-semester, three-hour per week course which might be divided between lecture and discussion in any proportion, depending on the individual instructor.

Because of the special emphasis now being given to linguistics, the Rhetoric Staff members were asked about their own freshman training in this area. Of the 145 members who responded to these questions, only four reported that they had had any study of the "newer grammars," and only one of these thought that the study was of any value as a means of improving his writing. Two people thought the study had intrinsic merit, but one of these questioned the value of confronting freshmen with such material. Twenty of the 145 reported some study of semantics. Only five of the 145 reported any study of history of the language. With this lack of background, it is not surprising that the instructors reacted unfavorably to the linguistic essays they were currently teaching. Even those who had acquired background in linguistics after their freshman year and who liked the subject itself, reported that student interest in such material was significantly less than in other kinds of "content" and that the students' writing did not seem to improve as a result of the linguistic materials they were studying.

Although many of the activities of the Rhetoric Research Committee were necessarily focused on past and current practices in the teaching of rhetoric, preparation of future students for rhetoric courses at the University of Illinois was also an important area for investigation. As a phase of this work, fifteen teachers from high schools throughout Illinois (chosen because of their outstanding records in both classrooms and professional organizations) and four consultants (members of the permanent Rhetoric Staff at the University) were invited to participate in a two-day conference at Allerton House, a University-owned estate. The major emphasis of this meeting was on probable revision of the booklet Standards in Freshman Rhetoric at the University of Illinois. Since high school teachers and their students throughout Illinois have constituted a large portion of the users of the approximately 50,000 copies of the booklet which have been distributed in the past decade, secondary teachers were a logical source of ideas to be considered before a second revision of the booklet. (The booklet was originally prepared in 1955 and had been revised for the first time in 1961 when Rhetoric 100, the remedial course, was dropped, as a result of the University's continuous effort to upgrade its rhetoric program.)

The key question in the conference was "Has the booklet been of sufficient value to warrant its continued publication?" Since the answer to this question was unanimously affirmative, the teachers were instructed to formulate "ideal" plans for the new version of the booklet. There was agreement that, in the light of the changing caliber of students entering the University of Illinois and the resultant

change in the nature of the freshman courses, the standards booklet should contain specific information about the current course content, emphases, objectives, and, particularly, the kinds of thinking and writing that must be done by University freshmen who want to perform successfully in rhetoric courses. Since students now entering the University have fewer problems with "mechanics," high school teachers favored less emphasis upon mechanics and more emphasis upon thought processes and techniques of organization and development.

In order to add breadth to the study, the Research Committee asked more than 40 other colleges and universities to supply information on the theory and practice of teaching composition in their courses. It is significant that fully one-third of these schools studied are now in the process of extensive revision of their Freshman English courses. It is also significant that at this time the Department of English at the University of Illinois is reviewing its own course offerings and methods of instruction. It is hoped that the findings of the Rhetoric Research Committee will provide a sound basis of fact for meaningful revisions.

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